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DEBASING THE POETIC COINAGE THE QUALITY AND FUNCTION OF POETRY

By ALICE WILLIAMS BROTHERTON

WE hear much of a New Movement in Poetry. That is a hopeful phrase; for where there is motion there is life. We have been summoned so often to weep over the Bier of Poetry that it is a relief to find her still a living force in the world. Whether through new influences she will be a more active agent depends largely, however, on whether this much-vaunted movement, of which for several years we have been aware, is really a working of the old leaven of imagination or merely a galvanic jerk induced by some new-fangled electric mental machine.

There is, in some minds, a fear that certain verse-vagaries in vogue are an attempt to substitute for the current coin of the poetic realm a counterfeit whose alloy bears the mint-stamp yet fails to assay full value.

The basic elements of poetry are clear visioning, intensity of emotioned force and harmonious artistic expression. Its vital characteristics, as distinguished from prose, are form, rhythm and imaginative language. In all genuine poetry creative energy and shaping art go hand in hand. Verse which lacks the quality of artistry can not be regarded as poetry; nor can we so regard the verse, however clever, which Matthew Arnold describes as "a flux of imagery to conceal a sterility of ideas."

It is the high function of poetry to interpret life and the world to the human soul. And it must present life, not in a heterogeneous conglomerate of details, but in pictures carefully focused; true in perspective, in atmosphere, color and form.

In the debate between the old and the new *form* of poetry I hold a brief for "the party of the first part"; for the poetry of ideas, inspiration, of the persistence of the structural laws of the art—as against the poetry of sensations, of vague mysticism and of formless expression.

I hardly think that the Muse has dropped, altogether, into that condition of "innocuous desuetude" over which Arthur Symonds, Yeats and the Symbolists, Imagists and Modernists are grieving. In a long apprenticeship to this word-craft I have often heard similar keening. But the funeral never came off. Poetry simply shook herself free of a fault or a fad or two and went on her way rejoicing. I can not believe any new movement is going to make over poetry altogether. The substance of poetry is eternal; the shape may vary from age to age: but any attempt to substitute prose-characteristics for sublimated thought, noble passioning and the harmonies of rhythm, depreciates its value and defeats its object.

Poetry is self-utterance. But the very need of utterance implies need of a kindred ear to listen. The carol of the bird is mate calling to mate. The song of the poet is deep calling to kindred deeps in other souls.

What is your art, O Poet?
Only to catch and to hold
Meshed in a frail word-mould
A little of life;
That the soul to whom you show it
May say "With truth it is rife,
This poem—I lived it of old."

Poetry in its highest development is the articulate soul of man. The poet is a soul strung to alertness, in full possession of every faculty, whose office is not to "evoke magic" but to dispel illusion, to interpret life, to weigh good and evil, to choose what is good and bring Truth in her singing-garment of Beauty to the ken of men.

The three things that go to the making of a poem are, first, the thought; second, the feeling that kindles the thought, *fires* it, so that it becomes plastic; third, the rhythmic word-arrangement that is the audible or visible shape. And of these the thought must be beautiful or real, the feeling must be sincere, the word-garment must be finely wrought. In all good poetry there is the double appeal of form and matter; shape is as essential as substance.

Poets are all who love, who feel
Great truths and tell them!

sings Festus. But it is not enough to feel the telling, the manner of the telling is full half of the poetic gift. The art or craft-side of poetry is as important as the thought side; and no honest poet can afford to be ignorant of what Lessing called "the mechanic of verse" and Brander Matthews emphasizes as "the metrical mechanism which sustains poetry and which differentiates poetry from prose."

In the beginning three factors united in the lyric; the singing-voice; the lyre whose chords accompanied it emphasizing and accenting the rhythm; and the thought or mental concept of the poem. Melody was thus two-thirds of the lyric. We have lost immeasurably by the loss of the lyre. The instrument and the chanting voice being ruled out by common custom, it is incumbent on the lyricist to replace them by a melody or sustaining rhythm in his lines; thought, feeling and melody must be *fused* in the phrase which embodies them.

"Music" writes Mr. Henry E. Warner "is the language of emotion pure and simple. Poetry shares music's rhythm and part of its emotion, which it strives to embody in language." But the effort to make poetry usurp the function of music is futile. Words carry melody up to a certain limit; but beyond that they can not go without serious sacrifice of the vital thought—witness Swinburne's delirious melodies which, too long continued, give the impression of a tireless music-box. "The Art of Music" says Sir Rabindranath Tagore "has its own nature and special function . . . Song begins where *words end*; the inexpressible is the domain of music." When *the tune flies away with the words* the words can not follow on foot.

The latest effort is to embody in poetry the picture-making, imagist effect; to substitute the objective attitude of the poet toward his work for the subjective personal note. Whether this can be successfully done it is as yet too early to say.

There is surely a happy mien in the poetic art. It is claimed that Emerson was "wanting in passion," though a truer distinction is to say that, like his spiritual son Matthew Arnold, he burned, not

with the red devouring flame of the sense but with the steady white flame of spiritual passion. But undoubtedly, as George R. MacMinn has said "he conceived of himself as a passive medium of transmission for divine messages to humanity." There must be a mean between this extreme of the school of "high seriousness" and the opposite one of the Decadents, Symbolists and Imagists. It is toward this mean, this middle ground that both schools of verse, the old as well as the new, are conscientiously striving; and the result may be awaited with interest.

In one thing both are agreed,—that the relation of poetry to *life* is an intimate one. Linked together like the Siamese twins, if the bond is severed, both die. When poetry becomes "too literary" or baldly technical its work is finished—so far as the living world is concerned; it is ready for the academic dead-house and the English Professor's scalpel. On the other hand when it rests on the fallacy of sheer "art for art's sake," substitutes sensations for feeling and word-painting for rhythm, it degenerates into mere verse. It must deal with the reality of both senses and spirit or its appeal is lost.

What Mallarmé styles "the old lyrical afflatus or the enthusiastic direction of the phrase" can hardly find a substitute in a "poetry of essences" or a mosaic of jeweled words set with a lapidary's care to hold merely a "mental transposition of emotion or sensation, veiled with atmosphere." Of necessity the lyric imagination is egoistic. You cannot get away from the personal equation. As the coin bears the mint-stamp so must the poem bear the imprint of the individuality, the selfhood of the poet. He is something *more* than a mouth-piece or a musical instrument played upon by ethereal vibrations; he is the conscious shaper of those vibrations or impressions into earthly melodies, visible music, capable of tuning men's heart-strings to echoes of his song. It is that "enthusiastic personal direction of the phrase" which makes for clarity and sincerity in his verse. Rhythmic language is all that the poet has to work with—rhythms that mark pulsations of feeling, throbs of emotion and *words* swept together by the intense energy of creative thought.

Poetic diction is not any particular mode or fashion imposed upon poetry by an age or school or cult: it is simply the natural direct expression of poetic thought under the heat of that enthusiasm of *acute perception* to which, for lack of a better word, we still give the name inspiration; an enthusiasm which fuses emotion, thought and words into a perfect unity. This poetic rapture of visioning, this ecstasy of cognition, is but one part of the poetic gift; an equally essential part of the poet's equipment is that shaping quality "enthusiastic *personal direction* of the phrase," the artistic molding of the Form which is to make visible the Dream. The substance of Poetry is indestructible, its mode of expression may vary from age to age; but in all its variants poetry must adhere to the vital elements of the poetic art—rhythm, imagination, clean language and clear thought.

MODERN TENDENCIES

There really is of late a fresh interest in poetry. Perhaps the ghastly realism of War and Suffering

brings an instinctive reaching-out toward the idyllic and the ideal to keep the world sane. What Mr. Vachel Lindsay calls "song-fire for the brain" is surely everywhere about us to-day. We are glad to welcome a new poet. We want to keep our ears open to the new notes. But even when the

Wind of passion and of song
Sweeps the soul along

we who are either makers or lovers of poetry must beware of being swept altogether away from safe moorings. It is incumbent upon us "try all things, to hold fast that which is good."

No one denies that at times poetry needs to be revitalized, that the poetic vocabulary needs occasional overhauling, that certain conventionalities of thought and phrase are as much out of date as ruff and fardingale. When Mr. Alfred Noyes says War has "demagnetized him poetically" he expresses not only his individual state but that of poetry itself which in a series of wanton experiments, of mechanical poetizings or of owlsh blinking of the laws of constructive art has swung out of its orbit. It needs to be brought again in touch with the great earth-currents and ethereal vibrations.

This revivifying, for several years, has manifested itself in two directions: in live themes, definiteness of expression and a fresh handling of metre by the legitimists; and in a feverish pursuit of novelty in subject and treatment by disciples of what is the fashion to call the New Movement in Verse.

The modernist (to use the newly coined name for the writer of new verse) is the Apostle of Change. In his creed a Tennysonian cadence is a crime, a moral sentiment is a weakness and an abstraction a puerility. The shop-worn poetic currency is to be called in and re-minted. Mr. Yeats's assertion that he intends to employ Ezra Pound to go over his poetry and cancel all abstractions is amusing, but it voices the fresh grapple of realism with the romantic spirit. In an article "The Relation of Sculpture to Architecture" T. P. Bennet lately said a word or two equally applicable to the vagaries of modern verse: "The inflated importance placed in recent years upon originality of any kind has led to the production of results that can only be described as the result of freakish ideas striving at any cost for new forms." It is one of the worst phases art can pass through. If the structural laws of an art are broken the resultant product may be novelty but can not be art.

The modernist Movement, which is really several movements loosely allied, according to its spokesmen is a protest against patterns, formulas and fixed laws. It is reaction against the "convention-ridden medium of emotional expression"; it is "formal emancipation," "freedom of utterance," "freedom from technical obligations," "definite separation from Victorian tradition," "greater austerity of meaning, economy of phrase and freedom of rhythmic movement." In the Preface of some "Imagist Poets" we read "we attach the term [free verse] to all that increasing amount of writing whose cadence is more marked, more definite and closer knit than that of prose, but which is not so violently accented as the so-called regular verse." "The fewer the obstacles between feeling and expression the richer the literary product must be" writes Mr. Arthur Springer.

To the trained mind rhythmic, verse-forms, metrical mechanics are not obstacles but aids. The formlessness of free verse is its own condemnation. For lack of

The touch of self-restraining art

it fails of its purpose; it is not poetry but prose improvisation of crude poetic thought. Do its looseness of structure and shambling rhythm, its ignoring of rhyme and its unbridled loquacity spring from anything but a shrinking from what Wordsworth called "the labor of art?" The first utterance of a poem must be swift, the "attack" assured and rounded, but the revision is deliberate and painstaking. Revision of course can be overdone and may result in editing the life out of a poem; indeed the modernist's chief complaint is that overpolishing has reduced poetry to a product

Faultily faultless, icily regular, splendidly null;
Dead perfection, no more!

But the fact that polish can be carried to excess is no reason for offering as poems chaotic mouthings in which only the perpetrator can see the potential poem. A kaleidoscopic mingling of colors and imagery does not constitute a poem: nor can we class under this head what de Gourmont terms "pictures of the intimate life of the brain" which are interesting pathologically but not otherwise.

The "exteriority" with which we are exhorted to replace "Victorian interiority" is an excellent thing in scientific research: as applied to poetry it probably means what Wordsworth indicates in his entreaty to the poet to "write with his eye on the object," to record first-hand impressions, not those taken from the granary of literature. The advice is good, but does the new verser really follow it? In many instances he substitutes for feeling and imagination the Naturalist's bald chronicle of characteristics. The first object of the modernist is to "get away from the abstract, to achieve the concrete"; but his verse shows continual excursions into the abstract. We are told "To intellectualize sensation and to elucidate emotional experience" is poetry's primary function and the poet must be "avid of life." This intellectualization of sensation combined with unbridled freedom of utterance produces some amazing effects.

The avowed aim of disciples of the new departure in verse is "definite separation from Victorian tradition." They achieve it. Down with law and tradition! is their slogan. Away with rhyme, rhythm, abstractions, the "prunes and prisms" of a cramping decency! Give us Nature stripped—the starker the better! Give us sensations instead of ideas; sink ethics and elevate bald glaring Fact! Form is hampering, give us free verse, free even to looseness, to license! They have no use for the Miltonic muse with

Sable stole of cypress lawn
Over the decent shoulders drawn.

Their muse doffs classic draperies for a wisp of floating chiffon, changes her chant to ragtime and the old-time grace of "woven paces" to the high kick and bacchic twirls of the café dancer. In the reaction against the reams of conventional verse thronging the shelves of Standard Libraries, the modernist develops a tendency more inimical to literature than any conventionality of theme or jog-

trot of metre. In his endeavor to see things in a new way and to say things never said before he invades the privacy of the soul and strips from life not only its illusions but its decencies. The effect is not

To see life clearly and to see it whole

but rather to thrust into the lime-light a distorted human nature and a degenerate soul.

This tendency to treat the morbid and sinful sides of life—begun by Baudelaire, continued with uncision by Verlaine and still persisting in de Regnier, whom de Gourmont dubbed the poet of the nude—was impressed upon the English "fleshly school" from Swinburne to Wilde. It is being grafted to-day upon American verse by those modernists who find a charm in French modes of thought. Now Franco-American soups may be excellent, but this Franco-American verse mirrors the faults instead of the virtues of both races. In order to get back to Nature, to reach the elemental, the primitive, the "concrete" in humanity—is it really necessary to parade in verse the brute instincts of the Stone Age? There still persists in the reading world an element of taste and refinement that bars from poetic expression the animal instincts and the venal vices.

It is perhaps ultra-Victorian to claim that one function of poetry is to refine and strengthen the morals of a nation. One wonders what will be the effect on the rising generation of the bold flaunting of erotic thrills and decadent imagery? The note of Sex is hammered incessantly; from Symons's laudation of nights of purchased pleasure to Mr. Masters's "In a Cage" there is hardly a volume free from the obsession. These things are not the heady froth of green Youth, for many of the leading spirits have reached the period of maturity if not of discretion; and, curiously enough, erotic bachelors of both sexes furnish most of the examples.

Evidently favorite text-books in the new school are the unexpurgated "Leaves of Grass," Baudelaire's "Fleurs du Mal," the "Laus Veneris" of Swinburne. What Le Gallienne terms "this body-sweet mortality" is celebrated with gusto by nearly every poetling. There is a frankly luscious gloating over the purely physical. There is too much of the earth, earthy: a decent reticence, apparently, is one of those Victorian traditions to be discarded, the effort of the up-to-date poet being to shock rather than to charm his reader. Eugenics has invaded the verse of divers women; maternity is given the publicity of a clinic and race-suicide is a favorite theme. I notice, however, that in public readings of "Patterns" the vivid stanzas depicting the pursuit by her lover of the lady in the "pink and silver" of what our grandmamas modestly referred to as one's "birthday-suit" are carefully elided by the prudent reciter: the public is not yet educated up to this phase of the nude in art. The tendencies indicated attack not the form alone but the very substance and spirit of Poetry; if such "modernism" is more than a passing fashion then the poetic art, on both sides of the Atlantic, is in a bad way.

The appearance of the Free Lance in poetry is periodic. The modernist phase has had many antecedents. They are all ear-marked by revolt against accepted laws and customs and a spirit like that

of Fenian Pat, who queried on landing at Castle Garden "Pfwhat's the Governmint? Fer Oim agin it!" So far the movement has been not evolution but revolution; it is frankly a literature of insurgency. Revolt carried too far means only destruction, not construction. It is as well to save some useful Victorian traditions out of the general upheaval. In poetry as in governments the new is

built on the old: raze the Bastile, by all means, but don't set up the Guillotine. When it comes to abolishing Form and to *syncopating* Rhythm, to claiming the name of poems for what Mr. Saintsbury calls "the pestilent heresy of prose-poetry" it is quite time to call a halt: for this is a debasing of the poetic coinage against which every sincere poet-craftsman must protest.

Alice Williams Brotherton

To be continued.

THE NIGHT OF BRAHMA

Faintly, slowly throbs the pulse of life
Through planets cold, through fading sun and star—
The drowsy universe has sunk to sleep,
Great Brahma rests, his day of ages done.

Put out are all the mystic lights of heaven
And all the lesser lights of earth put out,
The tender lights that shone in children's eyes
And lit the uplifted faces of the flowers.
For aeons stilled a thousand voices dear
That singing brooks and leafy birdland knew;
For aeons stilled the heart-sung melodies
That tuned the mighty music of the spheres.

Nor once arises on the lifeless air
A single earth-born exhalation sweet:
Lost, lost the blossom-scented breath of June
That all the wonder-deeps within us stirred.
Abysmal darkness blots the universe
From off the uncharted bourne of space and time

And all the green-clad worlds of yester year
Are shrunk to pulseless clods of frozen clay.

Where now are all the tinsel glories hid,
Whose suasive glitter lured the sons of men—
The puppet-shows by rank and fame enjoyed
In days when planets wore their summer-sheen?
Will any list in that wide nescience drear
To aught achieved by hero, seer or saint
When pride's last fluttering pulse has ceased to beat
And vanity of vanities is done?

Unmeasured ages long the Cosmic night,
A million times a million years, perchance,
Ere Brahma's waking brings another dawn:
Then one by one the dreaming stars awake
And flickerings pale light up the embered suns
While banished seasons, roused from slumber deep,
Return to rule their fair dominions lost.

Once more upon the illumined stage of time
The drama vast unfolds its scenes anew
With monster forms and countless writhing shapes
That pit their might against relentless law.

The loves and hates of buried centuries
Reviving send their currents bright and dark
Through throbbing veins of generations new,
And sin and sorrow cast once more their blight
Across the sun-lit spaces of the world.

So moves the mighty pendulum of Change
in rhythmic swing from life to death, from death
To life again; each stroke an age untold
That ticks away a waning universe
Or slowly brings it back to human ken.

Ellen Burns Sherman